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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 000410

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SUBJECT: YOUTH COULD BE KEY IN TAIWAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Classified By: AIT Director Stephen M. Young, Reason 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) Summary: KMT presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou appears to be making inroads with young voters (20-29 years of age), a group that voted heavily in favor of the DPP in the past and proved crucial to President Chen's electoral successes in 2000 and 2004. Some political experts tell AIT Ma enjoys a 6-to-4 advantage over Hsieh among the youth, but one leading pollster recently said Hsieh has been able to pull even with Ma among this group over the past 10 days. DPP insiders tell AIT they hope a 50-50 split of the youth vote will materialize, but worry that may not be enough to enable Hsieh to win the election. Many youth are attracted by Ma's clean image, dissatisfaction with DPP rule--the only ruling party they have known since coming of age--and concerns about employment prospects after graduation. End summary.

Youth Have Been "Green" in the Past...

12. (C) Both KMT presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou and DPP presidential candidate Frank Hsieh have been making concerted efforts throughout the campaign to court the youth vote. Historically, youth turnout has been low, and some experts estimate not more than 20 percent of young people vote. However, young voters (20-29 years old) were an important factor in President Chen's 2000 and 2004 election victories. Political experts tell AIT in the past the DPP had been able to win the youth vote by approximately a 2 to 1 or 6 to 4 margin. Youth viewed the DPP as progressive while the KMT represented a corrupt, entrenched elite.

...But Could Be Turning "Blue"

13. (C) Beginning in 2005 with Ma's election as KMT party chairman and after a series of high profile scandals involving President Chen's aides and family members, however, the DPP appears to have lost its hold on the youth. Some contacts tell AIT the KMT now enjoys the 6-4 advantage, which holds up among youth from all parts of Taiwan, including the south. One leading Taiwan pollster, however, recently told AIT Hsieh has been able to pull even with Ma over the past 10 days among the island's approximately 1.28 million young voters. KMT Division of Youth Affairs Director Daniel T.M.

Hsia told AIT that the KMT divides the under-40 vote into two different categories: those who have entered society and have begun their careers, and students still in school or in military service. He said the KMT is not worried about the first group, as it has suffered economically under the DPP's eight-year rule, and therefore the KMT is confident it will easily win this constituency. Currently, the KMT is gearing its efforts to attract student supporters.

14. (C) Hsia admitted that the KMT had never concerned itself with the student vote in earlier elections, because it was confident enough of its hold on other groups that it could overlook first-time voters. Events of 2000 and 2004 changed this mindset, and now the KMT realizes every vote counts. Students are indifferent towards political parties, he said, and look more to the "product." He believes they favor Ma for several reasons, including his clean reputation, his gentle bearing and photogenic appearance, and his humble attitude and lifestyle. He said that Ma has addressed the issue of most direct concern to students, namely the economy. The KMT strategy is to convince them that a vote for Ma is a vote for their own future.

15. (C) Hsia estimated student support for Ma at 60-70 percent. The challenge is translating that support to actual votes. KMT Youth League Coordinator Chen Chiang-ping described a ride share program which interested students could sign up for on the KMT Youth League website, offering free transportation to cities as far away as Kaohsiung. The Youth League has organized events, such as free music concerts and karaoke nights, to appeal more to young people's love of social activities and fun. Chen added that the Internet has been a very important tool used by the KMT to attract young voters. The design of the KMT Youth League's

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website has a decidedly feminine quality because the KMT has discovered that young female students tend to be the least likely to vote. A "Babes for Ma" contest where hopefuls uploaded photo submissions to the Youth League site for online voting proved so successful that the Youth League featured a "Hunks for Ma" contest shortly after.

DPP Hopes to "Reverse the Tide"

16. (C) The DPP lacks the financial resources of the KMT, and so cannot extend its party organization into Taiwan's university system as well as the KMT, explained DPP Department of Youth Development Director Chou Yung-hong. He admitted Hsieh is running behind Ma among youth by a 6-to-4 margin, but pointed to increased enthusiasm by young voters in the past few weeks, notably at the March 16 "Reverse the Tide, Protect Taiwan" island-wide rallies.

17. (C) Prior to that point, DPP organizers were disheartened at the indifference of youth to the election, but they were overwhelmed at how many youth turned out on March 16. Chou attributes the turnout to a renewed effort by the DPP to reconnect with its youth base, with an emphasis on addressing the concerns of the youth about the economy. Hsieh's attack on the "one-China market" espoused by Ma has caused young voters to rethink the wisdom of closer ties to the PRC. In particular, the recent events in Tibet are having a limited, but positive effect for the DPP in convincing youth that China is a genuine threat. The DPP is now hoping it can break even with the KMT in the youth vote, he said, and he remains cautiously optimistic that Hsieh will prevail if Ma's lead is cut to within 6 percent.

18. (C) The DPP is counting on non-traditional campaign methods to attract a youth that is increasingly indifferent to organized politics. Of these efforts, the "Reverse the Tide" movement organized by Freddy Lim has proven most effective. Lim, a heavy metal musician, enjoys the added credibility among youth of not carrying an official party

designation, something he shares with over half of Taiwan's students.

¶9. (C) Lim told AIT that the KMT is overconfident about Ma's appeal; in fact many young voters find him artificial and overly "packaged". He believes the KMT overlooks the fact that college voters have moved beyond their idol phase, and seek honest, engaging dialogue with candidates. He has encouraged Hsieh to engage youth directly, through open-mike discussions, appearances at music venues, or online, especially through Youtube. Lim also noted that Tibet has been having a definite late impact on young voters, but he thought a 50-50 split with the KMT was a best case scenario at this point.

Comment

¶10. (C) KMT sources are confident, but cautious. They aren't taking any chances, and have continued an aggressive outreach to youth up to the last moments of the campaign. DPP contacts are realistic that they are running behind, but believe they have cut the gap to where Hsieh still has a chance. DPP methods are more creative and savvy than those of the KMT, and young DPP supporters are passionate and idealistic. However, in the minds of a youth that came of age knowing only a DPP president, the DPP itself is seen by some as the "establishment" party, and so may find it hard to convince skeptics that Hsieh represents real change.
YOUNG